



Trump doubles down on provocative Cabinet picks as their fates hang in the balance

Analysis by [Stephen Collinson](#), CNN

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Smerconish: Trump is inviting confrontation with cabinet picks

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(CNN) — Donald Trump is refusing to back down over his Cabinet picks in the first clash in an epic battle he will wage against Washington when he takes office next year.

The coming days will show whether Matt Gaetz, Tulsi Gabbard, Pete Hegseth and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. have staying power for confirmation fights in the new Republican Senate over their assignments to safeguard the rule of law, the US intelligence community, the military, and the health and well-being of all Americans.

Each of the most provocative selections is facing criticism that they lack the expertise and experience to run the vast, specialized bureaucracies that would be under their control.

And debate over their prospects is intensifying following fresh revelations and allegations about their pasts, which will set up a test for Trump's intention to wield what he regards as almost uncheckable power from the Oval Office.

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CNN reported this weekend that Hegseth, Trump's pick for defense secretary, paid a woman who accused him of sexual assault in a settlement agreement that included a confidentiality clause, according to Hegseth's attorney. The Fox News anchor has denied assaulting the woman, according to the attorney, and was not charged in any criminal case or named as a defendant in any civil lawsuit in connection with the 2017 incident. The initial sexual assault allegation against Hegseth had caught Trump's team off guard last week, after the president-elect had already picked him.

Intrigue also deepened over a House Ethics Committee investigation into Gaetz, the potential attorney general, after a lawyer who represents two of the witnesses in the probe said Friday that one of his clients saw the Florida Republican, who resigned from Congress last week, having sex with a minor. Gaetz denies any wrongdoing, including ever having sex with a minor or paying for sex. He was not charged after a Department of Justice investigation.

There is also growing scrutiny over Gabbard's suitability for the job of director of national intelligence because of her positions that sometimes amplified the propaganda of one of the covert community's top adversaries — Russia.

And some senior medical experts are raising concerns over the qualifications of Kennedy, a vaccine skeptic, to safeguard generations of medical advances as the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, even though his outspokenness against processed food has found support among many top physicians.

Not all of Trump's picks are causing uproar. The selection of Florida Sen. Marco Rubio to serve as secretary of state has won praise on both sides of the aisle. But in a conventional administration, controversies raging around at least four key Cabinet picks would be seen as a disaster.

Trump is adamant he's not going to give in as he seeks people who will fulfill his goals of tearing down the Washington establishment in a second term he pledged to devote to

tearing down the Washington establishment in a second term. He pledged to deliver retribution. A source told CNN over the weekend that Trump sees Gaetz as his most important pick. The president-elect wants the former Florida congressman confirmed “100%,” the source said. “He is not going to back off. He’s all in.”

Johnson tells CNN that releasing Gaetz ethics report would open a Pandora’s box’

Trump has called on the Senate to, if necessary, cooperate with him to make recess appointments if the picks cannot be confirmed. Using such a move as a first resort rather than a final one, as has happened in the past, would be a sign that Trump, with a compliant GOP, plans to bypass the constitutional checks and balances of Congress and act with sweeping, unrestrained authority as president.

The outcome of the coming showdown will depend on whether Republican senators are willing to abrogate their own power to vet nominees and will cave under the furious political pressure that is certain to be trained on them by the “Make America Great Again” movement. The issue represents the first political crisis to confront South Dakota Sen. John Thune, who will take over as Republican Senate majority leader next year. And even if senators take a stand over one or two nominees they view as unqualified, it’s unlikely they will deal a defeat to the new president by throwing out all of the most provocative picks, meaning that some of them are almost certain to take jobs atop key government departments.

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The storm over Trump’s picks is deepening as the president-elect is working to complete his future governing team with positions such as treasury secretary and US trade representative — who will be critical to carrying out his populist trade and economic policies — still outstanding.

Gaetz — a pyrotechnical politician who made his name with his outspoken support for Trump and a series of political stunts — is attracting the most attention in part because of his decision to quit the House just days before the Ethics Committee was expected to release its report. Without him being a sitting member of Congress, the investigation will end with the report still under wraps, despite some GOP senators requesting to see what is in it.

House Speaker Mike Johnson told CNN's Jake Tapper on "State of the Union" on Sunday that releasing the report would open a "Pandora's box" since Gaetz had left Congress, even though such action would not be unprecedented. "The Senate has a role, the advise-and-consent role, under the Constitution, and they will perform it," the Louisiana Republican said. "They will have a rigorous review and vetting process in the Senate, but they don't need to rely upon a report, or a draft report, a rough draft report, that was prepared by the Ethics Committee for its very limited purposes." Johnson also said he had not discussed the matter with Trump.

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Johnson tells Tapper why House Ethics Committee report on Gaetz should not be released

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The president-elect's son explains the plan

Gaetz and several other Trump picks have caused consternation in some circles given the questions about their qualifications and past behavior.

"I think the whole point with these nominees, several of them, is their un-qualification, is their affirmative disqualification," Sen.-elect Adam Schiff said on "State of the Union" on Sunday. "That's Trump's point, because what he wants to do with these nominees is establish that the Congress of the United States will not stand up to him with anything," the California Democrat said. "If they will confirm Matt Gaetz, they will do anything he wants."

Rep. Jim Himes, a Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, warned Sunday that Republican senators should look to their legacies and not to Trump. "These people are manifestly unqualified, and they're not prepared to run the very complicated organizations they have been asked to run," the Connecticut Democrat said on CBS' "Face the Nation." He added: "A Republican senator who takes a vote to consent to the appointment of Matt Gaetz — a chaos agent, a performative social media, no-respect-for-the-rule-of-law individual — the Republican senator who votes to confirm Matt Gaetz or Robert Kennedy or Tulsi Gabbard will be remembered by history as somebody who completely gave up their responsibility to Donald Trump."

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Trump on the campaign trail made no secret of his plans if he won a second term. Many of his most committed supporters regard the federal government as a liberal deep state that has failed to respond to their needs. Trump, moreover, is still seething over the establishment's attempts to rein him in during his first White House term. So selecting Cabinet picks who are seen as unqualified to lead their departments may be an attempt to deal a blow against the credibility of government in itself.

The strategy was explained by the president-elect's son Donald Trump Jr. on "Sunday

Morning Futures” on Fox Business. “The reality this time is, we actually know what we’re doing. We actually know who the good guys and the bad guys are. We know who the guys who are fake,” he said. “It’s about surrounding my father with people who are both competent and loyal. They will deliver on his promises. They will deliver on his message. They are not people who think they know better, as unelected bureaucrats.”

Trump Jr. also suggested that the uproar surrounding some of Trump’s picks was exactly why he chose them and that it proves their authenticity. “A lot of them are going to face pushback, for the same reasons. Again, they are going to be actual disrupters. That’s what the American people want.”

It would take a handful of Republican senators to block the most provocative Trump nominees early next year, given that Democrats are likely to vote en masse against them. But several GOP senators made clear Sunday they had no problems with the people Trump has picked to staff the government.

Sen. Markwayne Mullin has a long-standing personal feud with Gaetz and has in the past held his behavior in contempt. But the Oklahoma Republican said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” that he would give Gaetz a “fair shot.” He added: “I’ve got a tough situation. ... I’ve got to set my personal situation with Matt to the side and look at the facts. If he’s qualified, he’s qualified.”

Missouri Sen. Eric Schmitt said he believed Trump’s nominees would get confirmed. “You have to have people you trust to go into these agencies and have a real reform agenda. And that’s why I think there’s real momentum, real momentum to get these nominations confirmed,” he said on “Sunday Morning Futures.”

On the same show, however, another Trump ally, Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville, warned there was “hard work” ahead in the confirmation process but praised Gaetz as a “fighter” who was loyal to the president-elect. “We have got the numbers. Let’s step to the plate, do our job, because we have to get this country back going in the right direction. President Trump only has a short period of time. Four years is not long.”

Across the aisle, Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman looked ahead to those four years and urged Democrats to acknowledge the big picture rather than playing into Trump’s hands

over every controversy. He said on “State of the Union” that the picks of Gaetz and some others were “just absolute trolls” that fit Trump’s purposes. “He gets the kind of thing that he wanted, like the freak-out. ... If we’re having meltdowns every tweet or every appointment or all those things, I mean, it’s going to be four years.”

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